

"How The City Nature Challenge introduced me to the snake next door."



DeKay's Brownsnake *Storeria dekayi*

Observed by Susan Matthews in Catonsville, MD

In the spring 2024, Baltimore Metro Area and Washington D.C. residents participated in a City Nature Challenges. What is a City Nature Challenge? It's a city-wide survey or (Bioblitz). Citizens took wildlife and plant sightings during a set time and logged them into a free App called iNaturalist. The City Nature Challenge Baltimore Metro search area included seven search areas that encompassed Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and sections of four additional counties. The National Aquarium hosted this year's City Nature Challenge 2024. According to Hallie Carter, Conservation Project Manager, at the Nation Aquarium, we collected a total of 10,154 observations in the Baltimore Metro Area which included over this day event from (April 26th – April 29th), a total of 1,645 species and a total of 766 observations.

As a Baltimore County resident, I was excited about the opportunity to participate in this year's event. The day before the City Nature Challenge began, I noticed a

small snake crossing a driveway. So, I stopped and helped him/her across. I took a picture of this snake (see above) and I logged my sighting into the iNaturalist App. I wasn't sure what snake species I had found. Could it be a Juvenile black rat snake I wondered. The next day I checked my iNaturalist sightings log and I saw that my snake observation had been changed to a DeKay's Brownsnake. Wow! I don't think I've ever seen this species of snake before. How exciting! I found myself asking more questions. Are they a common species of snake in our area? Where do they live? What do they eat? How did they get their name? What snake species are they most closely related too? I learned from my research that they are a pretty common species of snake here in the East coast. Why hadn't I heard of them before? They are a shy and nocturnal snake species that preys on slugs and snails. The more I found out about this species the more confused I became. Why was this shy snake species found out in the open on a driveway. Maybe a bird had carried him there. I learned from the Maryland Biodiversity Project that Red-shouldered hawks and even little American Robins prey on DeKay's Brownsnake. Perhaps this little snake escaped the talons of a bird of prey and that's why I found this leaf litter dweller out in the open.